Purchasing A Vintage Amplifier

By Ken Fischer

I receive many calls and letters from musicians with questions about pur chasing vintage amplifiers. This is a complex subject, but I hope I can shed some light on it. My definition of a "vintage" amplifier is any amplifier that is no longer in production in its original form. For an example a Fender® Model 5FGA 4X10 Bassman amplifier made in 1958 is a vintage amplifier. A Fender® 4x10 Tweed Bassman made last year is a "Reissue". A Kendrick 2410 4x10 Tweed is a "Reproduction" amp. There are also "Collectable" amps. These may be vintage or current production amps that have properties that make them desirable to people who collect equipment for their own reasons. For example a Fender® Model 26 Deluxe is both vintage and very collectable because it was the first of the Fender® Deluxes and came standard in a hardwood cabinet. A JTM 45 aluminum chassis Marshall is both vintage and collectable. Vintage for obvious reasons, and collectable because it was the first in the long line of Marshall amplifiers. It's a part of amplifier history. Examples could be given for Vox, and other brands but you get the idea.

Modern collectable amps such as Dumble, Trainwreck, and others, become collectable because they have a unique sound, are very scarce, both of the above, have a unique design, or are made collectable because of their use by a famous artist or artists. An interesting wrinkle is that modern collectable guitars and amplifiers seem to be increasing in value at a higher rate than the majority of vintage gear. It's really too soon to tell if this is a trend, or a government plot to balance our trade deficit. As far as I know none of the makers of modern collectable equipment had any idea this phenomenon would happen. Anyway, the selection of the right piece of vintage gear is still the benchmark for investing your money if profit is your motive. Most of us purchase vintage gear to enjoy rather than as an investment. The rest of this article is geared towards those who buy vintage gear for the joy of owning and using it.

Choosing an Amplifier:

When looking for a vintage amp there are three main ways people select the piece they want. By brand name alone, such as Fender®, Marshall, Vox or another. By brand and model, and sometimes by year also. An example would be a 1964 Vox AC-30 top boost. Or they might not have any particular amp in mind but are looking for something that catches their ear and eye. For example, string guru Dean Farley just purchased a Kalamazoo Model One. It's a cross between a Tweed Fender® Champ and a Vox AC-4. Sounds great, costs little, and how many people would start out thinking, "I think I want a K-200 Model 1"? So before you start the quest for the amp of your dreams ask yourself, "Do I know just the amp I want or am I on a hunt for a certain sound, and trying to find it in whatever comes along?" If you know exactly what you want that narrows the search. If you're on a hunt that may take a bit more time and work.

Where to Buy A Vintage Amp:

There are many sources of vintage amps. The magazine in your hands right now contains thousands of amps offered by both vintage dealers and by private ads.

You can look in this magazine, and others, for guitar shows. When on a general hunt for your yet unknown amp, guitar shows are an excellent source to scope out the different less known brands of guitars and amps. You can purchase amps at flea markets, through local ads, musicians, publications and so on. When buying an amp over the phone or by mail find out if you can return the amp if it doesn't meet your expectations. Speaking of expectations, guitar amps are usually sold by some of the following factors.

Desirability: For example, a Fender® Tweed 3x10 Bandmaster is more desirable than a Fender® Blackface Bandmaster and therefore, the price of the Tweed Bandmaster is higher than the later version.

Condition: The better the amp's physical condition, of course, the more it's worth. The better the condition of the covering, for example, the higher the value of the amp. There is a catch... beat-up factory original Tweed, again as an example, is worth more than being recovered in fresh, perfect tweed.

That brings us to...

Originality: The closer to having all the same parts it left the factory with the more it is usually worth. Reconed speakers are worth less than ones with original cones. If the speakers have been replaced with other than what came with the amp usually the amp's value will go down. The reason I say usually is because on rare occasions this doesn't hold true. If you have an 1980 Vox AC-30 Reissue that has had the factory stock speakers replaced with Blue Vox Alnico speakers the amp would increase in value. In fact, those speakers might be worth as much as the whole amp! Replaced or rewound transformers are a big negative factor on resale value also. Also negative are add-ons such as master volumes, effects loops, channel switching and other non-factory modifications. Here's a grey area item. Amps contain power filters. These have a life of a limited span, and then they fail. Do changed filters hurt the value more than filters that don't work? In other words, an amp that plays with changed filters versus an amp that doesn't play but has original failed filters. As a general rule the more original an amp is the greater its value.

Rarity: Some amps have a value not related to anything but the fact it's a very rare and hard to find piece. Sometimes these rare amps are also great sounding and that of course is a bonus.

Celebrity Value: How much would you pay to own a Marshall that belonged to Jimi Hendrix? How much is the Marshall Blues Breaker Combo used by Eric Clapton worth? You get the picture, I'm sure.

Making the Purchase:

When purchasing an amp by phone, there's a numbers game that is often used. Amps are rated on a scale of 1 to 10. Ten is "Dead Mint", or an amp in the same condition as the day it left the factory. One is either an amp or a leftover jelly donut, but is not in good enough condition to tell. This scale is linear in condition terms out non-linear in terms of determining selling price. For example, to go from a Marshall Plexy 50 that's a 5 to one that's a 7.5 might cost you 50% more. To go from one that's a 5 to one that's a perfect 10 might cost you three times more. There's another catch. The seller often sees his amp as a higher number on this scale than the purchaser would assign it.

Another problem is this scale is based on condition and not usually sound. If you purchase an amp rated a perfect 10 but is sounds awful, the dealer can only be held to account if the amp is not in the *condition* he promised. Asking a dealer to judge sound for you is not a good idea. What sounds good to the dealer may not match what you think an amp should sound like. Everyone has different tastes, right? Also, many times a bad sounding amp only needs a new tube, cap, or resistor to bring it to life. Even a simple bias adjustment can make a world of difference. Unless the dealer sells you the amp, "fully serviced", you're the one who will be responsible for its setup to proper specs. Any "not working" or "as is" deals are also at your own risk.

Also keep in mind that it's much harder to return an amp purchased overseas, so be careful that you and the seller have all the facts and details correct before you use that credit card. Going to amp shows at least lets you see the amp before you buy it. There's generally no return privilege, so do check the amp out carefully. Most shows won't let people crank an amp out and that is one downside to such a purchase. Most local private sales will be at a place where you can crank out the amp, so that's a plus. Phone or mail private sales usually go very well but be aware there are a few sharks in that ocean.

Reissue and reproduction amps:

Many favorite vintage amps are now available as reissues or reproductions. The reissues are of course made by the same brand manufacturer as the original. A reissue Fender®, Marshall, or Vox and has the companies service and reputation behind it. Reproduction amps are made by independent companies and range from poor to excellent. Their resale value tends to drop however, a point to be considered. Most people think the originals sound better. These days that's not always true. The advantage of a reissue or reproduction amp is that its brand new and shouldn't require the maintenance of an original. It should hold up better on the road and is replaceable if stolen. The original may indeed sound better in many cases and hold, if not increase, in value. So there you have it. Buying a vintage amp should be fun, but do make you purchase in a educated manner and you'll be more likely to be completely satisfied with your purchase.

Next Subject:

I had a long conversation with Bruce Zinky® of the Fender® Custom Amp Shop. A real nice guy with a lot on the ball. He reminds me of myself during my days at Ampeg. Anyway, Bruce and his crew have all agreed to come to work for Trainwreck! That should really help shorten my waiting list, and give Bruce a hefty raise besides. *April Fools Fender®!* ...or is that a maybe?!!!

Next issue: The Trainwreck Living Giveaway Contest.

Ken builds his highly-regarded Trainwrech amplifiers in Colonia, New Jersey. VG

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